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Reviewed Work: Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov: A Psychoanalytic Study

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Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's new study appears at a time when the theory and practice of psychoanalysis are coming under heavy assault in our country. Within the past few years a number of books have seriously questioned both the scientific validity and the therapeutic value of psychoanalysis. The acknowledged "founding father" of classic psychoanalytic theory has likewise been savagely attacked of late. Not unlike Karl Marx, another extremely influential modern thinker whose stature has plummeted dramatically (as a result of the recent collapse of Communist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe), Sigmund Freud's reputation has been severely tarnished amid charges that he may have falsified evidence in developing some of his key theories. In the November 1993 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, for example, Frederick Crews, an English professor at Berkeley who once applied psychoanalytic concepts to literary texts quite liberally and enthusiastically (e.g., in his book, *The Sins of the Father: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes, 1966*) mercilessly exposes a nefarious, hitherto "unknown" Freud, one whose famous "seduction theory" was allegedly arrived at through dishonesty, equivocation, and falsification of data. In addition, a bitter controversy has arisen in the U.S. about the effectiveness of so-called "repressed memory" therapy. In the wake of some recent cases of childhood incest, many experts are now arguing that it is the therapists themselves who are suggesting the repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse that their patients claim to be retrieving, memories that sometimes involve satanic rituals, infant human sacrifice, and other bizarre practices. On the cover of a recent issue of *Time* magazine, the editors go so far as to ask whether the discredited Freud—like God before him—might not be "dead." The present climate, in short, is hardly a propitious one for the reception of a new work by an author who promises to apply Freudian theory in providing a "psychobiography" of the central male hero in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

Even if the present climate were less hostile to Freud and his theories, there would probably still be many (especially among Slavicists) who would question the benefit of taking a psychoanalytical approach to literature. Rancour-Laferriere's new book will apeal to readers, therefore, only if they are willing to accept two important premises: 1) that fictional characters, such as Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov, can be treated as "real" people who are indeed psychoanalyzable (an issue that the author adresses cogently and at some length in his introduction), and 2) that psychoanalysis is itself a valid and worthwhile procedure that ought to be performed upon people. For those who can accept these two initial premises, Rancour-Laferriere's psychobiography of Pierre Bezhukov will provide them with a number of keen insights into the personality and character of Tolstoy's famous fictional hero. Upon reading this book, they will come to understand better, among other things, the lingering effect upon Pierre of his "orphan" status (that is, his unresolved relationship with an absent mother and a rarely present father); the attraction of busty Helene Kuragina as a pre-oedipal selfobject for the infantile Pierre; the similarities between old Count Bezhukov and Dolokhov, both of whom serve as "father icons" for the hero; the manner in which Pierre's association with the Masonic brotherhood allows him to "deflect" or sublimate his homoerotic urges into a humanitarian impulse to help mankind (that is, to practice brotherly love); and

the therapeutic effect that Platon Karataev, as a maternal figure, has upon Pierre, launching him on the road to personal autonomy and maturity. I found especially enlightening the author's discussion of how Pierre, when he rekindles his love for Natasha Rostova following his epiphanic wartime experiences, essentially "backslides" on the independence of self that he had managed to achieve under Karataev's tutelage. Platon, the author explains, had helped Pierre to learn at last how to overcome his infantile narcissism and to treat loved ones as separate, autonomous objects. The reentry of Natasha into Pierre's life, however, suddenly presents the hero with a woman who provides an almost unlimited source of what Fenichel calls "narcissistic supplies," and she quickly succeeds in taking control over his life. As Rancour-Laferriere puts it, "Tolstoy hands Pierre the perfect selfobject on a silver platter, and Pierre can hardly refuse" (228). This precipitous retreat from freedom that the hero experiences in the final sections of *War and Peace* provides, in part, the basis for the life of conjugal bliss and domestic tranquility that Pierre and Natasha are shown to be leading in the controversial Epilogue that Tolstoy appended to his novel.

The merits of Rancour-Laferriere's new book are many: the writing is lucid, precise, and direct; the interpretations are stimulating and imaginative, yet still sound and amply substantiated. As his earlier book on Gogol has clearly demonstrated, the author brings to his study of Russian literature not only the psychoanalytical expertise of a therapist who is well-versed in Freudian and Kohutian theory, but also the critical acumen of a fine literary scholar who posesses acute sensibilities as a reader of artistic texts. Indeed, one wishes, if not for that reason alone, that Rancour-Laferriere would have seen fit to stray much more often than he does from his strictly chronological account of Pierre's psychobiography in order to provide his readers with more literary asides: to note intertextual relations between *War and Peace* and other works of nineteenth-century Russian literature, especially other works written by Tolstoy. The few allusions that he does make to such texts as Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Gogol's "Ivan Shponka and His Auntie," and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* merely whetted this reader's appetite for more of the same. I must admit to having been a bit surprised—if not mildly disappointed—to find that more of a connection was not made in this book between Pierre and Levin, who are arguably the two most highly autobiographical characters found in Tolstoy's fiction.

It seems to me, for instance, that Rancour-Laferriere's analysis of one of Pierre's post-Borodino dreams (the several dream interpretations he provides, incidentally, are among the most rewarding features of this book) would have benefited from some discussion of Levin, whose situation in *Anna Karenina* seems quite analogous to the one Pierre faces in his dream. Just as Pierre sees two very different groups of men standing before him (a group of riotous army officers including Anatole Kuragin, Dolokhov, and Denisov carousing together at the English Club and a group of simple Russian soldiers gathered around old Bazdeev) so too does Levin feel pulled in his life between two socio-moral polarities: on the one hand, the wholesome life of toil and simplicity led by the Russian peasants (apotheosized during the night he spends on a haycock in Part III) and, on the other, the sinful life of luxury, idleness and parasitism led by sybaritic aristocrats (illustrated during the evening he spends with Oblonskii, Vronskii, Iashvin and other urban playboys at the English Club in Part VII).

If there is any weakness to be found in this book, it stems from the inherent difficulty that arises when one tries to psychoanalyse a fictional character from a work of literature: namely, how does one manage to keep separate psychoanalysis (the excavation of Pierre's psyche) and literary analysis (the excavation of Tolstoy's text). "I will treat him as if he were a real person," Rancour-Laferriere announces at the outset with regard to the subject of his psychobiography, "as do the narrator and the other characters in Tolstoy's novel" (1). The problem with such an approach, however, is that even when we do suspend disbelief and treat Pierre as a "real" person, we still continue, as readers and literary critics, to view Tolstoy's protagonist simultaneously as a literary device that is being manipulated by its creator (or, at best, is being dialogically engaged by him). Due to our inherent "outsidedness" from the text, we cannot help but know Pierre differently than do the other characters in *War and Peace* (we posess what Bahktin calls a "surplus of vision"). Take, for instance, the episode when Pierre joins the Freemasons. Rancour-Laferriere claims that the initiation ceremony "elicits complicated and interesting material from the depths of Pierre's psyche" (117). Few readers would disagree. But what makes this scene so revealing to us is in large measure the symbolism that Tolstoy has injected into the narrative account of the testimony. As readers standing outside the text, we can appreciate the nuances of the narrator's ironic, double-voiced reporting of the scene (and of Pierre's feelings during it). The other characters in the novel, meanwhile, no matter how well they get to know Pierre, never can. The reader of Rancour-Laferriere's book senses, accordingly, a constant tension underlying the main discussion in *Tolstoy's Pierre Bezhukov*: a tension between psychoanalysis and literary analysis, between those perceptions of Pierre formed by characters living wholly inside the world of the novel and those perceptions of Pierre formed by readers who stand at once both inside and outside it. When Rancour-Laferriere informs us that Pierre treats Helene as a pre-oedipal selfobject, the psychoanalyst who is exploring Pierre's psyche is speaking. But when the author supports this claim by noting how Pierre's name means "stone" and Helene's upper body is repeatedly characterized by the narrator as "sculpted stone," that observation is being provided by an astute reader and literary critic who is exploring Tolstoy's novel as an artistic text. Some of Pierre's friends might be able to know that he treats Helene as a pre-oedipal selfobject, but none of them can possibly know how Tolstoy reinforces this impression by creating remarkable similarities between Pierre and Helene in his portrayal of them.

Let me conclude my critique of *Tolstoy's Pierre Bezhukov* by taking advantage of the roundtable format provided by this journal and posing directly to Professor Rancour-Laferriere two questions that I have that were stimulated by reading his fine book. First of all, is Natasha, who comes to serve as a "mother icon" for Pierre, experiencing an Oedipal complex of her own? It seems to me that the Rostovs—like the Kuragins—exhibit some incestuous tendencies and that Pierre, who in many ways resembles old Count Rostov, represents a "father icon" for the adolescent Natasha. This would provide a different explanation for the extreme posessiveness that the hero shows with regard to Natasha when he angrily throws Anatole out of his house following the foiled abduction attempt: it is as if Natasha were Pierre's daughter, not his future wife. Indeed, before Natasha can marry Pierre, not only must her fiance Andrei

die, but so too must her own father. My second question is: might not the limping Captain Ramballe, the "alien" who gets Pierre to reveal his own "French" identity while eating, drinking, and speaking of romantic love with him, perhaps be meant to symbolize the devil? For the late Tolstoy, after all, the devil is routinely identified with libidinal desire. This becomes a particularly loaded question, of course, when we consider that Captain Ramballe—a total stranger who gets Pierre to reveal quite openly to him many intimate secrets of his inner life—also bears an uncanny resemblance to the modern psychoanalyst. If Tolstoy indeed meant for Captain Ramballe to personify the devil, then the author of *War and Peace* may also be making subtle and indirect commentary on any future psychoanalytic project that would put Pierre on the couch and seek to probe his psyche!